

The Girl on the Other Side of the Street

‘Bit of rain wouldn’t hurt,’ Bert said, for the tenth time. Jimmy Hawkins nodded automatically and pushed his hat back on his head. Together they looked at the sky. Cloudy, promising rain. Might get it in time for the winter sowing. The drought had been going for a long time now. They were all praying for rain. Meanwhile, it was sticky hot.

‘I’m dry as dust,’ Jimmy said.

They ambled along the main street of Bourke, hands in the pockets of their trousers, hats on the back of their heads. Saturday afternoon, their one day off from being jackeroos. Pub time.

There was a recruiting poster outside the post office. They paused to consider it.

Australia has promised Britain 50,000 men! it proclaimed. *Will you be one of them?*

‘I’m thinking of giving it a go,’ Bert said. He was a scrawny youth with a pronounced overbite and very flat feet – a bloody good horseman but Jimmy doubted the Army would take him. Jim wasn’t sure how he felt about the war. Britain was Home, and Australia was part of the Empire, but Germany or the Dardanelles... they seemed so far away that it was hard to think of them as being Australia’s business. Still, every man had to do his bit.

‘Wouldn’t mind seeing the world,’ Jimmy allowed.

The streets were full of people; Saturday all the men from the surrounding stations were in town, some with their wives and families, but most on the strut, heading for the pub and the two-up game out the back.

Time they were heading that way themselves. He could just taste the cold clean ale sliding down his throat. He and Bert turned to cross the street to Fitz’s pub.

A bullock dray was crawling past, raising dust. They waited, talking idly.

‘Look, there’s the Carter sheila,’ Bert said, with a nod of his head to the other side of the road. Everyone knew Carter’s. They were a drapery, but they sold just about everything else as well – even saddles. Jimmy had only been working near Bourke for a few months, after a stint droving down the Darling, but he’d heard about Carter’s – and about the stern-faced Mrs Carter, who put the fear of God into any bloke who misbehaved in her store.

So he looked across the street with idle interest, wondering if this girl took after her mother. The dray moved away, and at the same moment the clouds parted and a shaft of light poured down over the girl, gilding her face and making her dark hair shine.

He felt a hard thud in his chest, as though someone had kicked him. She looked up and saw him. Such a clear, straight gaze. You could see at once that there was nothing cheap about her, nothing shoddy or tawdry. She was as true as they came.

An emotion he didn't recognise fountained inside him. A golden, glorious feeling that flowed up and up and filled him completely. Something like certainty, something like jubilation. Something like joy.

Hurriedly, he pulled his hands out of his pockets and straightened his hat, and tried to smile at her. It took him a while, because he felt as though he'd been knocked clean off his feet. She blinked at him as he smiled, and then blushed a little and turned away, moving down the road instead of crossing, as she'd clearly meant to.

'Come on, mate,' Bert said. 'No use wasting your smiles on her. We're not good enough for the likes of Ruby Carter.'

The jubilation drained out of him in a moment. His feet were leaden as they crossed the street, going at an angle towards Fitz's. Jimmy followed Bert without seeing. Everywhere inside him where the golden feeling had flowed was empty. Dark.

Nothing seemed worth much, all of a sudden.

Because Bert was right. A jackeroo without any family connections wasn't a proper match for a girl like Ruby Carter. Ruby. That was a perfect name for her, with her red lips – but not with rouge, no, just red with life. He had Buckley's chance with Miss Carter.

He got drunk. What else could he do? He drank as he'd never drunk before, until he couldn't remember what he was doing or saying.

His feet were cold. His head hurt. Oh, God, he was going to chunder. He rolled over and opened his eyes. Green. Outside? He couldn't think. A scribbly gum above him. Something making a noise. The creek. He crawled to the creek and cupped his hand for a mouthful but he couldn't bring himself to drink the brown, muddy water. The smell of it triggered the vomit.

Afterwards, he wet his handkerchief in the cleanest pool of water and wiped his face. His head felt the size of a melon. Best not to think about the taste in his mouth.

No-one around, but there was an empty bottle of rum under the scribbly gum, ants all over it. They'd be sorry.

He sat, knees up, arms dangling over them, and stared across the creek at the dry, rolling plains. The red soil was too bright to look at in the morning light. Almost not morning – the sun was near to overhead.

He vomited again, bringing up only bile.

A fine way to spend Sunday morning.

Disgusting. That's what he was. No wonder a girl like Ruby Carter wouldn't look at scum like him.

For a moment he was overwhelmed. Useless. Worthless. That's what he was. The memory of her face accused him. A man – a wreck – who drank and puked and slept Sunday away instead of going to church.

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She was beautiful. Not pretty, not soft and sweet like ordinary girls. No, she was beautiful. When she had blushed and turned away, had there been the smallest, slightest smile at the corner of her mouth?

Yearning almost tore him apart. Yearning to be better, to be worthy of her, to be fine and clean and upstanding, like her.

Above him in the scribbly gum, a kookaburra called, mocking him. Its harsh laugh cut into his head sharply but it made him sit up.

This was Australia, not Britain. The old rules of class and privilege didn't apply here. If a man was hard-working and clean-living and dedicated, he could improve himself. Improve himself until he was respectable.

Until he was worthy of *her*.

He was educated – he hadn't finished school until he was fifteen. He could read, figure numbers, write a good hand. He knew stock, horses, dogs. What was he fit for that was fit for her?

If he could find it, he'd work until he dropped, he'd put his back and his heart into it, full steam.

A kind of excitement gripped him, making him forget his abused stomach and aching head.

A memory came to him of the last drove he had done, taking a hundred head of steers down to the railhead at Bourke. They'd been met at the railyards by the stock and station agent... Stevens, that was his name. Bernie Stevens. A man in a suit with a fine Homburg on his head and an air of being listened to. Not much older than he was, Jimmy thought.

He could start small. Working in the yards, maybe. A kind of apprenticeship. Work his way up until he could look her in the face without shame.

He would go and see Stevens right now.

Jimmy sprang to his feet; his head spun and he vomited again.

Perhaps he should get cleaned up and go in the morning, when he wouldn't look like something that had been dragged through a bush backwards by a sick cat.

He hadn't had a drink for three weeks. He hadn't sworn, or gambled, or even *thought* about sinful things. Anytime the urge took him her face rose up in his mind, calm and kind and beautiful, and he was on the right path again.

For three Sundays he'd gone to Mass, and been delighted to find her there, up the front with her family – her mother, sister, sister's husband and their two kiddies. Her father was dead, he'd found out. He had lurked near the back afterwards until she left, and once she had shot a quick glance at him that made him hope she remembered him from their first encounter.

He didn't know anything about women's clothes, but hers looked better than anyone else's. More stylish, somehow.

He'd made sure to smile at her mother.

Stevens had asked him back today, to meet Mr Trimble, the other manager in the firm. Jimmy knew Trimble – he'd played rugby against him in his schooldays, and the man was a fine prop.

He took a moment before he walked up to the door to brush the dust from his shoes with his handkerchief. Then he strode as confidently as he could up to the door marked 'Office', and opened it.

Two hours later he pushed open a different door, one marked 'Drapery'.

Carter's store was big – it had four different counters, a table with bolts of bright cotton on it, a display of headless dressmaker's dummies in ladies' frocks, neat stacks of men's shirts and trousers on shelves, open drawers of shirt collars, even a section for boots and shoes. It smelled of lavender and starch. And it seemed to be full of people. A man examining the saddle slung over a trestle, a family with half a dozen kids looking at new hats with Mrs Carter keeping them in order, two women fussing over stockings or something – there she was. Notions, the sign on the counter said.

Her dark head was bent towards the shorter of the two women, a chattering thing in a bright purple dress. Ruby listened attentively, and nodded, then pulled a brown paper parcel out from under the counter. The woman whipped it into her bag and handed over some money; while her friend pointed to something on the stocking she was holding.

Jimmy walked up to the counter. The two biddies glared at him, and the chattering one pushed whatever she had bought deeper in her bag, as though she was afraid he'd grab it off her. He caught a glimpse of the label: Ladies Travelling Necessities, whatever that was.

He took his hat off and fidgeted with it until she looked up. The two women left in a huff. He didn't notice. She was looking at him. And smiling, almost laughing, as though there'd been a joke and he hadn't noticed. But not mocking him. Her mouth curved so sweetly.

'Can I help you?' she asked.

'I hope so,' he said. He put his hand out. 'I'm Jimmy Hawkins. I'm working with Stephen's and Co, learning to be a stock and station agent.'

Her mother had appeared behind him. He was aware of her sharp gaze between his shoulder blades. He looked around in time to see her nodding at Ruby. She moved away, just a little, but it was permission, no doubt about that. The dreaded Mrs Carter had given him the go-ahead!

'Ruby Carter,' she said, taking his hand. 'I think I've seen you at Mass, haven't I?'

The touch thrilled up his arm and went right through him. Her mouth was too wide for fashion, but it was made for kissing. Her gaze, a little shy, dropped to his own mouth, and she blushed slightly.

'Yes,' he said. 'I was hoping I could walk you to Mass this Sunday.'

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Ruby let go of his hand, and smiled. Smiled at *him*, with her heart in her eyes, and he felt again that thud, that kick in his chest, and he recognised it for what it was.

Love.

‘I think I’d like that,’ she said.